Silenced Mbembe Muses

ALISA LAGAMMA

Curator in Charge, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

With its penetrating rawness and poetic lyricism, a recent acquisition by The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a striking centerpiece for the African collection (Figure 1a). Carved from a dense wood, this sculpture—addressing a subject of universal relevance, the relationship of mother and child—has endured some three hundred years since its creation by an artist active in what is today southeastern Nigeria, near the Cameroonian frontier (Figure 2).[1] The integration of this work into the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing's survey of sub-Saharan art introduces a seminal yet relatively unfamiliar sculptural tradition that is known through fewer than twenty works now preserved in the West. This essay examines the Metropolitan Museum's *Maternity Figure: Seated Mother and Child* in relation to that body of work. It further addresses what is known about their collective history and seeks to integrate these fragmentary artifacts into a fuller picture of the role they may have played in their original communities.

THE METROPOLITAN MBEMBE MATERNITY FIGURE

In the Metropolitan work, a seated woman gazes forward with her hands placed on either knee. The rounded volume of her head contrasts sharply with the rectilinear outline of her shoulders. Below the point of intersection of the limbs, the calves extend down vertically. At the compositional midpoint, the horizontal form of a child sweeps across the vertical axis of the female torso. That element extends with its head at the mother's proper left hip and its legs wrapped around her right side. At the base and back of the female figure are signs that it was originally part of a larger entity. On the reverse side the exposed wood surface is raw from the neck down. Across the rest of what remains of the finished surface, the pronounced vertical grain is in vivid evidence throughout. Erosion has resulted in deeply grooved channels that powerfully define the overall aesthetic, and this weathering has instilled the subject with a heightened quality of endurance and fortitude. Despite this process of wear, a great deal of surface detail has survived. Crisp outlines of the ovoid ears project from the sides of the head, deep eye cavities command attention, and the face retains an expression of contemplative introspection. Paradoxically, exposure to the elements appears to have somehow distilled the work, so that its essence is revealed.

This object was acquired in 2010 from Hiroshi Ogawa through Christie's. Ogawa had purchased it in 1974 from Hélène Kamer's gallery in Paris shortly after its arrival from western Central Africa.[2]

A PIONEERING EXHIBITION

Kamer presented Mbembe sculpture in the landmark exhibition "Ancêtres M'Bembé," which introduced the international art world to what remains to this day essentially the Mbembe corpus (Figures 3–5).[3] The eleven full-bodied, rugged, and rustic figures of monumental stature featured in that inaugural show presented a completely unknown sculptural tradition to connoisseurs of African art. That sensibility constituted a major departure from the established tastes for traditions like those of the Dogon of Mali and the Fang of Gabon that gallerists had emphasized since the early twentieth century. In the introduction to her catalogue, the sole monograph devoted to this tradition, Kamer (now Leloup) reflected on the new direction epitomized by this discovery: "For the last twenty years that I have devoted to 'l'art nègre,' I've seen the interest and taste of collectors evolve. In this art that was called 'savage,' a preference for forms already defined by a classic perfection developed: Fang statues, Baule masks, Benin bronzes. The criteria of quality were the fineness of the sculpture, harmony of the volumes, brilliance of the patinas, in short, the same as those used since the Renaissance to judge works of art."[4] For Kamer, the forms embraced up until then were assimilated

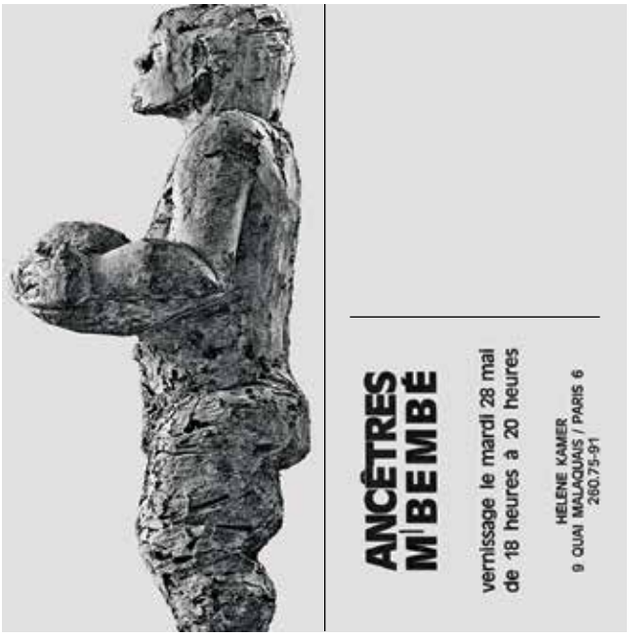
Metropolitan Museum Journal 48

1a. *Maternity Figure: Seated Mother and Child*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 15th–17th century. Wood, pigment, resin, nails, H. 42½ in. (108 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, 2010 and 2008 Benefit Funds, Laura G. and James J. Ross, David and Holly Ross, Noah-Sadie K. Wachtel Foundation Inc. and Mrs. Howard J. Barnet Gifts, 2010 (2010.256). Photograph: The Photograph Studio, MMA

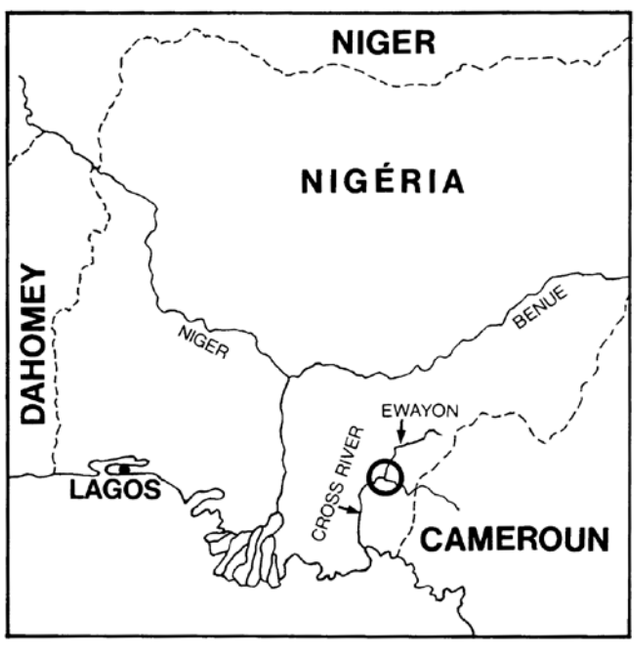
1b. Detail of Figure 1a

relatively easily into Western tastes, but the tough boldness of this artistic vision represented a challenging departure.

The unveiling of the Mbembe works made manifest a tradition unlike any that had defined African art until then and epitomized the potential for new revelations that remained possible in the field. In February 1974, shortly before the exhibition, one major work was acquired from Kamer by the curator Pierre Meauzé for the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens (now part of the Musée du Quai Branly), Paris (Figure 6). It was also published by the authority on Nigerian art, Ekpo Eyo, in the survey *Two Thousand Years, Nigerian Art*, issued to mark the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, which was held in Lagos, Nigeria, from January 12 to February 15, 1977. That seated figure, with its long attenuated limbs, arms extended forward and cupped hands resting on either knee, is now among the highlights of non-Western art featured in the Pavillon des Sessions at the Musée du Louvre, Paris. The work's human form is pared down to its underlying structure, so that its gender is difficult to determine. Surface erosion to the face has swept away most of its original features. All that survives are traces of horizontal depressions for the eyes and mouth as well as the slight vertical ridge of the nose and oval ears that project at either side of the head. Throughout, the exposed grain of the wood is emphatically horizontal, and successive parallel strata visually evoke layer upon layer of geological sedimentary deposits. In its report for the minister of cultural affairs at the time of acquisition, the Louvre's laboratory analyzed the wood and identified it as *Afzelia africana*, otherwise known as "doucier" (a variety of oak), or "apia." Several varieties of this tree are known to attain a maximum height of 65½ feet and a diameter of 6½ feet. X-rays revealed that the work is composed of a single piece of wood but that the nose had been reattached and partially restored. The author of the conservation report concluded, "The X-ray study of the entirety of the sculpture underscores the beauty of the work."[5] Despite the extent to which the representation has been distilled, the suggestion of an expression of intense reflection lingers.



3. Invitation to "Ancêtres M'Bembé," Galerie Kamer, Paris, May 28, 1974. © Hélène Kamer



2. Map showing the Mbembe region. From Kamer 1974. © Hélène Kamer

THE DISCOVERY: FROM THE CROSS RIVER TO THE LEFT BANK

The international recognition of Mbembe sculpture resulted from field collecting by the African dealer named O. Traoré in dialogue with the eye and instincts of Hélène Kamer. Already established internationally as a leading dealer in African art, Kamer had undertaken extensive collecting on the ground in Mali, Guinea, and Ivory Coast earlier in her career. She recalls that during the 1970s West Africans regularly traveled to Paris with works that they had imported into France, and active collectors and dealers perused them in the hotel rooms of the sixth arrondissement that the Africans used as their base of operation.[6] Through these channels, an influx of artifacts from the Nigerian-Cameroonian border region commenced, as a result of two phenomena: European art dealers were not traveling to this area because of the

4. Installation view, "Ancêtres M'Bembé," Galerie Kamer, Paris, 1974. © Hélène Kamer

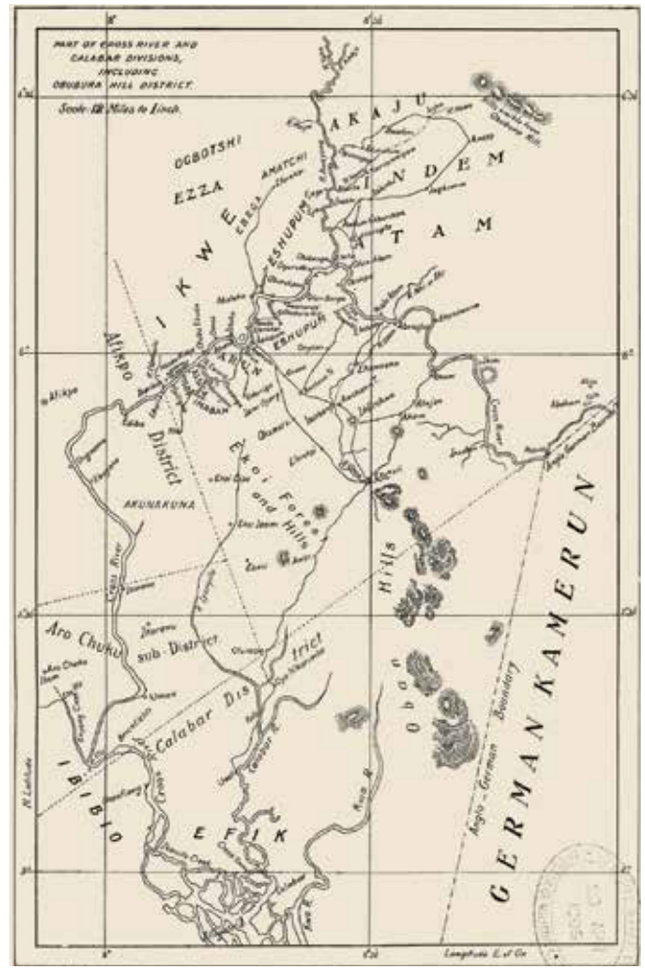
5. Installation view, "Ancêtres M'Bembé," Galerie Kamer, Paris, 1974. Figure 21 in this article (Figure 1 on the gallery exhibition checklist) is not shown in this image, as that work was displayed in the gallery window (see Figure 4). © Hélène Kamer

Biafran War, and Malians engaged in the art trade during the 1950s and 1960s, having exhausted sources for material closer to home, had continued to seek out artifacts farther and farther east.[7] Kamer first became aware of Mbembe sculpture on September 29, 1972, when she encountered Traoré, a dealer from an established Malian family, at the hotel where he was staying on the rue de l'Ancienne Comédie. Among the works she saw that afternoon, a massive statue from Nigeria with broken arms immediately caught her attention. In acquiring that work, Kamer inquired about its origins. In order to protect his source, Traoré declined to discuss specifics of where it had been collected but promised to return with other examples as well as information on their use, significance, and subject matter, which he would gather from an elder on his next visit to the region.

From his base in Lomé, Togo, close to the Nigerian border, Traoré made two further forays to obtain additional works for Kamer. He returned to Paris from the first trip on February 6, 1973.[8] At that time he provided the provenance of the works he brought with him, relating them to a small group known as the Mbembe, located east of the town of Abakaliki in the former Anambra State in the Cross River region (Figure 7). He further reported that an Igbo elder had informed him that Mbembe chiefs oversaw annual tributes to the founder of their village's lineage. Such celebrations took place in a large structure where all men who had proven themselves as warriors gathered. A monumental sacred drum, ten to thirteen feet long and adorned with representations of the founding couple, was the principal feature of this setting. The female subject depicted was the spouse who had given birth to the lineage's first male descendant. Young men demonstrated their worthiness by placing before the drum, which served as a shrine, the severed head of an enemy they had slain.[9] British colonial interdictions of such devotional practices contributed to the decline and gradual abandonment of these village sanctuaries. Traoré indicated that it was nonetheless necessary for him to obtain the consent of the community to acquire the damaged works that survived. On July 13, 1973, he returned to Paris from his final reconnaissance journey in search of Mbembe works. He had alerted Kamer in advance that nothing further remained in situ. In addition to transferring the last remaining sculptures for what was then a considerable price of 55,000 francs, he relayed information obtained from an elder concerning their association with historical figures. After that exchange, Kamer never heard from Traoré again. The content he provided was published with the launch of the gallery exhibition on May 28, 1974.[10] In her commentary Kamer situates the provenance of all twelve works acquired over the course of her exchanges with Traoré in relation to the town of Obubura.[11]

Beyond those twelve Mbembe works, only about five others are identified in Western collections, including two intact drums in Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum (formerly Museum für Völkerkunde), both collected in 1907 (Figures 8, 9); a seated female figure in the National Museum

6. *Seated Figure*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood (*Afzelia*), H. 25⅜ in. (64.5 cm). Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (inv. MNAAN 74.1.1). Photograph: Hughes Dubois; Musée du Quai Branly/Scala/Art Resource, NY



7. Map of the Cross River region. From Partridge 1905

of African Art, Washington, D.C. (Figure 10); a seated male figure now in a private collection (Figures 11a, 11b); and a seated male figure formerly owned by the French-born artist Arman.[12] Within this context, the monumentality and full-bodied treatment of the examples first presented by Kamer are distinguished by an overarching stylistic consistency that suggests the work of three distinct hands.

A HISTORY OF THE MBEMBE

The attribution of these works to a Mbembe cultural tradition identifies them with a term that was not in use prior to the nineteenth century. The communities to which these works have been credited were small, highly decentralized ones on the banks of the middle Cross River and its northern tributary, the Ewayoň, or Aweyoň. Historically, raids by coastal peoples who supplied the Atlantic slave trade heavily affected the larger Cross River region. The port of Calabar was the seat of that market and of the European presence from the sixteenth century onward. Until the late nineteenth century, however, European trade goods and Christian beliefs made their way inland indirectly through middlemen-merchants such as the people of Arochukwu, who fiercely prevented coastal traders from passing through their villages.[13] The nineteenth-century colonial occupation of the region by Britain marked an end to the slave trade as well as to certain indigenous religious practices. A British government station for the Cross River region was established at Ikom in 1884, and by 1900 its district commissioner Sir Ralph Moor had led a punitive expedition to Arochukwu. That campaign opened the way for British firms to develop trading posts upriver.[14]

Over the course of the nineteenth century, migrations of peoples from the north and south toward the left banks of the Cross River led to the convergence of many rival groups. The term "Mbembe" came to be associated with a number of

villages concentrated on the east side of the middle Cross River and Awayong Creek, east of the eastern and northeastern Igbo peoples and west of the Ejagham, in the area around the town of Obubura in the former Ogoja Province. Anthropologist Rosemary Harris, who undertook field research in the region during the 1950s, has noted that in 1965 the designation "Mbembe" covered the compact settlements of a semi-Bantu population of less than 40,000 in villages of 100 to 3,000 inhabitants.[15] The Mbembe observed a double unilineal kinship system in which rights to land and houses were inherited through the father and other movable property and jural rights over individuals through the mother.[16] Ekamanei, or "born of the same mother," denoted the latter and was conceived as a group among whom wealth was shared.[17]

8. *Slit Drum: Seated Figures*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, ca. 1520–1620. Wood, L. 130 in. (330 cm). Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, acquired from M. von Stefenelli (III C 21947). Photograph: © bpk, Berlin/Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen/Art Resource, NY

9. *Slit Drum: Seated Male Figure*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 19th century. Wood, L. 86⅝ in. (220 cm). Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, acquired from M. von Stefenelli (III C 21948). Photograph: © Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz

10. *Maternity Figure: Mother and Child*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 19th–early 20th century. Wood, pigment, seeds; 26¾ x 19⅛ x 19¾ in. (68 x 48.6 x 50 cm). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Museum Purchase (85-1-12). Photograph: © Photograph by Franko Khoury, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, each independent Mbembe settlement was led by a head chief appointed by his peers. In this capacity he served as the principal medium through which the community communicated with the spiritual realm, linking the living to the departed. Leaders who performed this priestly function were referred to as Okpobam.[18] Sir Charles Partridge (1872–1955), a British colonial official who served as assistant district commissioner in the Obubura Hill District, recounted a 1903 interview with one such head chief in the palace of Etatin. Enthroned on an elevated clay couch, the leader provided the following account of his duties: "I am the oldest man of

11a. *Seated Male Figure with Rifle and Bowler Hat.* Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 20th century. Wood, H. 39¾ in. (101 cm). Private collection. Photograph: © Pauline Shapiro/ Sotheby's

11b. Back of Figure 11a

the town, and they keep me here to look after the jujus, and to conduct the rites celebrated when women are about to give birth to children, and other ceremonies of the same kind. By the observance and performance of these ceremonies, I bring game to the hunter, cause the yam crop to be good, bring fish to the fisherman, and make rain to fall."[19]

In Mbembe society, all men and women identified with age-set groupings, and men also belonged to multiple structured associations. Such organizations crossed kinship lines and played a role in governance. They constituted an executive branch within the village and maintained a shrine outside its confines in the bush.[20] Among their responsibilities were the selection and installation of chiefs and the funeral rites of association members.[21] They had the authority to redress the infractions of individuals in a given community by exacting fines on their matrilineage. In response to such penalties, the family exerted its influence to reform the offender's behavior.[22] The popularity of such groups constantly shifted to allow for the adoption of new ones.[23] By the 1950s, however, the associations' power had diminished to such an extent that men were reluctant to pay the entrance fees.[24] Those cited as most influential were Eberambit, the preeminent warriors' association; Ocheika, whose focus was ritual; and Okwa, devoted to secular concerns. Harris notes that entry into Eberambit required not only the payment of a fee but also evidence of martial prowess demonstrated by the presentation of an enemy's head.[25]

The Ekpe, or Leopard Society, was active throughout the Cross River region during the nineteenth century.[26] It had originated among the Ejagham peoples by the 1600s as a secret association known as Ngbe in the forested regions of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. From there it was disseminated along trade routes to neighboring groups including the Efik, Ibibio, Anang, and Igbo, all members of the semi-Bantu language family; the Bantu-speaking Kpe and Balundu; and some of the Kwa-speaking Igbo.[27] On a local level, membership in a specific chapter of Ekpe/ Ngbe brought together a community's men whatever their kinship ties. Its hierarchical grades allowed individuals to

attain mastery of increasingly esoteric degrees of knowledge. Advancement was self-determined based on ambition and financial means.[28] Every chapter owned a shrine, drums, and costumes that were housed in a lodge prominently situated within the village. On a regional level Ekpe/Ngbe afforded its diverse and highly decentralized membership a shared ritual affiliation and a network of interactions that contributed to their peaceful coexistence.[29]

THE *IKORO* AS A COMMUNAL MBEMBE MOUTHPIECE

Prior to the twentieth century, a focal point of each autonomous Mbembe community, as well as those of the closely related Ibibio, was a monumental ceremonial drum, a slit gong with two apertures at the top, known as an *ikoro*.[30] Housed in a dedicated sanctuary, the *ikoro* served as an altar. It was also the means by which community members were apprised of important developments and through which they collectively communicated with their neighbors. The *ikoro* was played with two sticks of hard wood exclusively by the individual assigned that role. Its sound, or communal voice, could carry announcements over a distance of ten kilometers. News ranged from emergency warnings of fire or enemy attack to announcements of the deaths of important elders or the launch of a festival. Most important, the beating of the *ikoro* was used to summon the community's men to demonstrate valor in warfare, and warriors responded by presenting the *ikoro* with a trophy head on their return from battle. According to Traoré, semiannual celebrations before the sanctuary featured dancing to songs of martial prowess.[31]

A site of its constituents' spiritual force, an emblem of their unity, and the centerpiece of civic life, each instrument was given a specific name and closely identified with a particular village. Accordingly, its creation was a significant undertaking and necessitated lavish ornamentation. By the time Harris did her research, she found no signs of wood carving in Mbembe communities and learned that carved artifacts were generally purchased from neighboring peoples.[32] Given the *ikoro*'s importance and scale, the creative process was especially demanding. An elaborate ritual celebration preceded the selection and cutting of the tree from which the log for the drum was hewn.[33] Hollowing and carving took weeks or months, over the course of which the artist's tools required daily refortification by the associated deity.[34] Each work was customized to feature a sculptural program of figurative or animal imagery at one or both ends of the slit gong's cylindrical body. The human subjects were typically a nurturing maternity figure or a fierce male warrior brandishing weaponry and a trophy head. While the two subjects might be placed at opposite ends of a single instrument, some drums were ornamented with a single figure at one end or the same figure at both ends. Percy Amaury Talbot (1877–1945), who served as a district officer, described one classic example documented in an Ekoi village: "At Nchofan . . . the drum . . . was a wonderful example of its kind. It was cut from a solid piece of wood, trough-shaped. . . . At either end sat a carved figure, male to the right, female to the left, and to the right hand of the latter, raised on a post, was Tortoise."[35] While the depiction of the aggressive male figure alludes to the heroism of the community's defenders, that of the life-sustaining mother addressed the essential role of its women in ensuring prosperity through numerous offspring.[36] Upon the instrument's completion, rituals of consecration served to "open the heart" of the drum.[37] Harris provides an account of funerary rites that she witnessed in the Adun village of Ofada in 1957 in which a slit gong was a central element. The instrument was the property of the Ekagu association, whose members had gathered to mark the passing of one of their group. While she does not comment on any sculptural elaboration of the instrument, she relates that each member danced before the corpse and concluded his tribute by throwing an egg at the slit gong. The egg was thought of as a receptacle for life and symbol of divinity. That ritual gesture served to protect the dancer and elicit a blessing.[38]

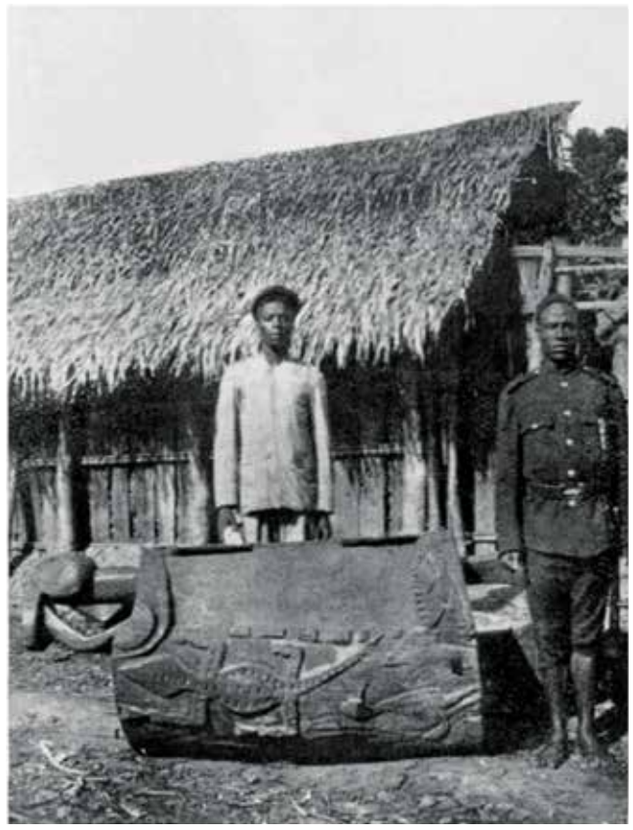
Devotion to the Afranong, or distinguished ancestors, was a focal point of Mbembe spiritual life and the likely subject of its artistic representations.[39] Two complete examples of Mbembe *ikoro* now preserved in Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum were collected in 1907 in the Cross River region by the German ethnologist Max von Stefenelli.[40] Radiocarbon dating of one of those *ikoro*, originally from the Abiakuri settlement, indicates that it is between four and five hundred years old (Figure 8). This massive piece, which weighs about a ton and measures nearly eleven feet in length, is highly weathered, so that the iconographic details of the figurative elements have been significantly obscured. The exposed grain of the log from which it was carved is horizontally oriented as in the case of the *Seated Figure* on view at the Louvre (Figure 6). Continuous with the cylindrical drum vessel are platform extensions at either end. At one extreme they support a seated figure holding his arms to his sides and facing the drum body, and at the other a figure is seated with his back flush with the drum chamber. That slightly less eroded figure holds a drinking vessel in his right hand and an unidentifiable object in the other, his knees bent with feet firmly planted. The other Berlin *ikoro* is a nineteenth-century example from a settlement downstream from Abiakuri (Figure 9). One end of that work features a single seated male figure wielding in his right hand a bifurcated knife once used in warfare and in the left a trophy head. At the time of its collection, it was said to have been carved between sixty and eighty years earlier. This more recent work retains on its surface a great deal of black and white pigments as well as carved details such as bracelets

and a distinctive hat.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, when those works left the region, it appears that their use had largely been abandoned. A transitional state in which such artifacts remained physically present but were viewed as anachronisms is reflected in Partridge's 1905 account: "The next morning we called at Ikorana, a place on the left bank, twenty-six miles above Itu, which has also long been under missionary influence. . . . The local jujus are quite neglected, and my attempts to gain information about them met with a 'we have advanced beyond all that' sort of reply. A huge wooden dug-out drum lay decaying in the bushes, and the highly-cultured children from the school watched with contemptuous interest in my examination of it."[41] Partridge photographed the drums he saw outside association houses in the villages of Ogada (Figure 12) and Avonum (Figure 13).

Most of the now-independent seated figures attributed to Mbembe artists that are preserved in Western collections appear to be fragments originally part of monumental ceremonial drums (Figures 1a, 6, 10, 11a, 14–20). This is evident in traces of the platforms, part of the *ikoro* structure, that remain at the base of these figures. The weathering of the contours of those breaks suggests that the separation occurred some time ago and that the figures remained in their communities long after they became detached. These regal figures are physically powerful yet serene in a posture of straight back, bent elbows and knees, arms extended so that each hand rests on its corresponding knee. Four of them hold children. Given the scale of the figures, the original instruments must have been especially impressive. It is possible that the solid figures were preserved as precious creations in their own right once the hollowed instrument, which was the structurally most vulnerable section, rotted away.

12. "Totem-pole" and drum, Ogada. From Partridge 1905, p. 220, fig. 52



13. Drum at Avonum; interpreter Jumbo and Constable Chuku. From Partridge 1905, p. 216, fig. 51

MBEMBE PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

In contrast to the tranquil demeanor of these works, several other figures burst with vitality and may constitute another genre within the Mbembe corpus. In her final exchange with Traoré, Kamer received information concerning oral traditions relating to three of the male figures (two free-standing and one seated), which suggested that those works commemorate specific leaders and may be independent sculptures (Figures 21–23). Following successful wars and the founding of new villages, leaders were said to have had themselves depicted in a sculpture. Reportedly carved seventeen years before its subject's death, the massive standing male figure holding in his left hand a trophy head that is larger than his own was identified as Appia (ca. 1529–1596), a great chief and founder of the village named after him (Appia Koum) (Figure 21). According to that tradition, Appia's sculptural tribute was positioned at his burial site in the center of the community adjacent to the chief's residence and was the focus of annual celebrations that kept his memory alive. The figure's clenched, bared teeth, broad squared torso, and muscular rounded buttocks combined with the fractured surface of the wood's grain define a formidable and brutal character.

Closely related in form, a commanding seated figure with

14. *Seated Female Figure*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 32⅜ in. (82.1 cm). Private collection, courtesy of Entwistle, London. Photo by Roger Asselberghs (Studio Dehaen), courtesy Bernard de Grunne Archive

15. *Seated Female Figure*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, 32¼ x 21¼ in. (82 x 54 cm). Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Beyeler collection. Photograph: Robert Bayer, Basel

knees bent supports an even larger trophy head on his left side and gazes up and beyond the viewer (Figure 22). His torso is narrow at the summit and expands to a rounded volume in the area of the stomach. The work's subject was identified as the sixteenth-century founder of the village of Mabana remembered for the exemplary bravery he instilled in his warriors. Given that the work in question has been carbon-14 dated to 1785 +/- 35 years, this information is approximate at best. According to oral legend, Mabana requested that his renown be expanded by having his effigy brought to Obubura, the main town of his people.[42] There sacrifices were made to give thanks following victorious battles.

The slender, tensed torso of a standing figure with arms at its sides, now missing forearms, hands, and head, has been associated with Chief N'Ko (Figure 23). The absence of the head is accounted for in that leader's statement to the notables of N'Koum before his death: "I know that after our death, our great grandsons will know more comfortable centuries than our own; but to remind them that this ease comes from us, who have fought for their freedom, I ask that the head of my sculpture be cut off and buried with the rest of my body. This will remind them that numerous heads were severed for their liberty but if our faces have disappeared, our powers will lead them nonetheless."[43] In her

16. *Seated Female Figure*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 28 in. (71 cm). Private collection, Paris. Photograph: © Chantal Casanova

17. *Seated Female Figure* (formerly *Maternity Figure: Seated Mother and Child*). Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 29½ in. (75 cm). Private collection, Paris. Photograph: © Dominique Cohas

1984 survey of African art, Marie-Louise Bastin represents Mbembe sculpture with a freestanding male figure that may have served in a similar capacity. That work is unprovenanced, but she relates the oral traditions provided by Kamer concerning the three works discussed above.[44]

A contemporaneous desire to create enduring markers to such courageous figures appears to have given shape to another regional commemorative tradition to the north (Figures 24, 25). A cluster of eight lifesize male figures that share characteristics of the Mbembe portraits has been attributed to the Yungur/Mboi/'Bəna peoples from the Eastern Gongola Valley of the Upper Benue River region. Vaguely associated with northeastern Nigeria at the time of their arrival in the West in 1969, those minimally documented works entered collections about the same time as the Mbembe figures. In each, a relatively small head crowns a massive body in which the definition of chest, waist, and lower body is pronounced despite the extensive erosion. Component elements are the broad shoulders and chest, extended volumetric torsos, and trunklike thighs. Compared to the Mbembe male figures, the anatomical transitions appear more modulated and their overall tapered forms more elongated. Over the course of her research in the Benue River region from 1980 to 1981, art historian Marla

18. *Seated Female Figure*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 30⅜ in. (77 cm). Collection Liliane and Michel Durand-Dessert, Paris. Photograph: © Hughes Dubois

19. *Maternity Figure: Seated Mother and Child*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 34⅞ in. (88.5 cm). Private collection. Photograph: © BAMW Photography

Berns recorded schematic figures carved from a single log that remained in situ. The *kwanda*, or those carved figures found in ‘Bəna communities north of Dirma in the Ga’anda Hills, were commissioned in pairs by extended families. The works were carried during ritual dances as the actual body of the subject. In nearby steep-sided massifs, the Mboi commemorated all male and female elders with effigies known as *kpaniya* conserved in a remote sacred site.[45] On the basis of those findings, Berns proposes that the Mboi, Yungur, and ‘Bəna incorporated carved tributes to the dead in post-burial rites held to honor and secure the blessings of departed ancestors.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME: MBEMBE MOTHER-AND-CHILD FIGURES

As noted earlier, the depiction of mother and child across the region reflects the essential role of women in contributing to the growth, expansion, and prosperity of their families and communities. At the same time it pays tribute to that profound biological connection as a metaphor for future vitality. The four (and possibly five) known Mbembe mother-and-child figures afford an array of interpretations of that formal dynamic. Of these, the example in the National Museum of African Art retains the greatest amount of detail and appears to be the most recent (Figure 10). In that composition, the mother leans forward over the child, whom she supports across her bent knees. She cradles the infant’s head with her left hand and protectively places her right hand on its thighs. This work is formally closely related to a male figure, which appears to be by the same hand (Figures 11a, 11b). It is likely

that the figures were originally elements of a single drum.[46] Their scale, details of their facial features, and patterns of erosion are very similar. The iconography of the male figure crowned by a bowler hat and grasping a rifle clearly dates it to the twentieth century. The rifle, positioned at a diagonal, is nestled under his right arm, with its muzzle grasped in both hands. This European weapon contrasts with the more traditional knives brandished by other warriors depicted in the corpus and extends out from the figure's torso so that its barrel rests on his knee and left hand. At the back is a rectangular slab where the figure was once attached to the drum.

The face, coiffure, and adornment of the female figure are especially well preserved. The delicate oval face has a narrow nose, thin pointed lips, and scarification in the form of raised lines and dots on the cheeks, temples, forehead, and chin. Black seeds are embedded in the cavities of her eyes, and the coiffure bears touches of red and dark pigment. Similarly, the eyes of the male figure have been accentuated with surface additions including a metal patch. A prominent accent is the necklace of leopard teeth, carved from wood, that adorns the figure's neck. Although the child's features can no longer be discerned, there are traces of an elaborate painted coiffure. The navels of both parent and offspring are prominently emphasized. The degree of surface detail that survives gives a sense of all that is missing from the related works. Partridge found additions in the areas of the eyes designed to imbue them with an especially remarkable lifelike presence: "The finest specimen in the district is at Nyima, a small village of the Igbo Imaban tribe on the left bank of the Ewara Creek. [The drum] occupies a hut surrounded by a high stockade of pales. On it are carved a snake swallowing a fish, a lizard, a bird, an iguana, etc. Attached to the drum at each end is a female figure in wood, almost life-size, naked and painted. . . . These figures had eyes of looking-glass, which gave them a rather weird effect."[47]

Another mother-and-child pairing provides a nuanced comparison (Figure 19). The commanding mother gazes upward. The detachment of her upright presence is softened at the point of intersection with the horizontal extension of the child across her lap. The base of the child's head rests on the mother's left forearm. Its legs, bent at the knees, hang over the side of the mother's right thigh. The mother's breasts are defined in relief as pendant ovals. The child grasps and draws sustenance from the left breast.

The Metropolitan's mother and child is an especially arresting variation on the integration of the two figures as vertical and horizontal elements, in that the child is mini-

20. *Maternity Figure: Seated Mother and Child*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 37 in. (94 cm). Leloup Collection, Paris. Photograph: © Hughes Dubois

21. *Standing Figure with Trophy Head Identified as Chief Appia.* Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 35 in. (89 cm). Private collection, Paris. This work was included in the 1974 Galerie Kamer exhibition and was shown alone in the gallery window. Photograph: © Raymond de Seyne

mally supported and appears to float across the center of the composition (Figure 1b). By contrast, another arrangement positions the child vertically, so that it is integrated into the negative contours of the mother's body while echoing her overall form and posture (Figure 20). Both the Metropolitan work and this example feature a pronounced vertical orientation of the wood grain. Some specialists have wondered whether this indicates that these two works were created as independent objects rather than as elements of a slit gong. However, both figures are elevated so that they are seated on the vestiges of some larger structure. It is possible that each was originally the sole figurative element of a drum far more intimate in scale than the Berlin example (Figure 8). The formal features articulated across these two works closely parallel one another and suggest the hand of a single sculptor. These characteristics include the shape of the head that narrows at the chin, the raised form of the ears, the broad cylindrical neck that intersects abruptly with the sharp horizontal of the shoulders, and the merging of the hands with the knees so that the arms and legs form continuous undulating lines. In addition to these signature details, the artist responsible for these two works favored a concentrated compression of the figures, a marked departure from the hieratic approach for the nursing mother and child (Figure 19).

The gesture and attitude of one seated figure suggests that a now-missing child originally may have been at the center of the composition (Figure 17). That robust woman wears a sagittal crested coiffure, and her expression is especially animated with mouth open. She leans back with her right arm extended and bent at the elbow. The left forearm rests on its corresponding thigh and is broken off at the wrist. Her gesture appears to have been designed to allow her to cradle something that once filled the void delimited by her torso, thighs, and arms. Ultimately the sculptural corpus of heroic male warriors and nurturing mother-and-child figures appears to complement the Mbembe system of unilineal kinship. Such representations may have been intended to reflect on and celebrate the distinct but complementary powers attributed to an individual's male and female lines of descent.

MASTER HANDS IN MBEMBE SCULPTURE

While the entire Mbembe corpus is distinguished by a rusticity that has been compounded by the works' exposure to the elements, the degree to which this quality has been exploited by different artists varies. The relative refinement of the heroic nursing mother and child is shared by a series of other works that appear to represent the vision of an individual master (Figures 6, 14, 15, 18). All those representations closely parallel bodily arrangements of long limbs and compact heads that feature similarly pronounced

22. *Seated Male Figure with Trophy Head Identified as Chief Mabana*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 25⅜ in. (64.5 cm). Horstmann Collection, Zug, Switzerland. Photograph: © Hughes Dubois

23. *Standing Male Figure Identified as Chief N'Ko*. Mbembe peoples; Ewayoň River region, Cross River Province, Nigeria, 17th–18th century. Wood, H. 42½ in. (108 cm). Private collection. Photograph: © Jon Lam/Sotheby's

noses and circular ears. The serene composure of these works contrasts dramatically with the intense creations of yet another hand evident in the figures of Chiefs Appia and Mabana as well as in one seated female figure (Figures 21, 22, 16). In those creations sheer power is embodied in muscular physiques whose especially rough surfaces of exposed wood whorls present a wild quality. This artist shocks the viewer through both the heft of his figures and the degree to which he exaggerates the scale of the severed heads wielded by the male leaders. The two works by the master of the Metropolitan mother and child do not present the arresting theatricality of those approaches that instill awe in larger-than-life ancestral personages. Rather, they explore a highly intimate relationship, and in so doing inject a dimension of experimentation into a quintessential subject. The originality of each of those mother-and-child compositions suggests a highly imaginative creativity. This artist's idiosyncratic reinterpretation of classic subjects for distinct patrons also

24. *Male Figure*. Yungur/Mboi/'Bəna peoples; Eastern Gongola Valley, Upper Benue River region, Nigeria, 19th century or before. Wood, H. 43¼ in. (110 cm). Private collection, Paris. Photograph: © Brigitte Cavanagh

25. *Male Figure*. Yungur/Mboi/'Bəna peoples; Eastern Gongola Valley, Upper Benue River region, Nigeria, 19th century or before. Wood, H. 35⅜ in. (90 cm). Itzikovitz Collection, Paris. Photograph: © Brigitte Cavanagh

appears consistent with the independent character of each Mbembe community.

It is interesting to consider how deeply the sensibility of individual Mbembe masters penetrated the wood core of these creations that have been so ravaged. It is as if the aging, which erased the finishing touches applied at completion, exposed their artistic essence as they were originally conceived.

CONCLUSIONS

The manner in which material culture from Africa was gathered in the field as recently as the 1970s has made it challenging to fully reconstruct the significance of a work such as the *Maternity Figure: Seated Mother and Child* now in the Metropolitan's collection. An awareness of the process whereby the piece arrived in the West is a critical dimension of its history. By the time this work was collected by Traoré in the Cross River region in 1972, it had long become a relic of past practices in the community that commissioned it several centuries earlier. At that time the sculpture was part of a larger structure that may have been a collectively owned slit gong. Long after that larger creation decayed, the solid figurative element remained in situ as an independent sculpture. Given the corpus of related works that survive and commentaries about the ceremonial life of Mbembe communities, it is likely that essential references for the artist of the Metropolitan Museum's *Maternity Figure: Seated Mother and Child* were representations of mother-and-child figures integrated into carved slit gongs. The idiosyncratic treatment of the physical union of mother and infant would have contributed a fresh definition to a ubiquitous image. A review of the Mbembe corpus further suggests that such powerful mother-and-child representations were on occasion foils to the fiercely aggressive warrior figures whose presence called on men to emulate the bravery of exceptional male leaders. In contradistinction, the presence of this allegorical maternity figure would have led the Ekamanei, those born of the same mother, to reflect on their collective bond as a unique and self-defining source of strength and prosperity. Once the original role of this work in an Mbembe community became an anachronism, its arrival in Paris expanded definitions of a canon of African art. The rawness of this tradition and the originality of the artist's interpretation of a universal theme make the work a creation that invites comparison across the Metropolitan's encyclopedic collections.

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I thank Hélène Leloup for sharing her discoveries and bringing to life the history of the arrival of these extraordinary creations into Western collections from her firsthand accounts and archives. I am also most appreciative of the wise and thoughtful comments that Herbert M. (Skip) Cole provided on an early draft of this article. Finally, I express my appreciation to James Green for his tireless and enthusiastic assistance in assembling the materials that I have drawn upon for this piece.

NOTES

1. Testing of this work by the National Science Foundation Arizona Accelerator Mass Spectrometry laboratory, using the radiocarbon calibration program, CALIB, in September 2010 has yielded a date of A.D. 1482–1636 (BP 348 +/- 34 years). Several other works in the corpus have been tested with comparable results. Figure 14 was tested by Alliance Science Art on December 10, 1994, by Mebus A. Geyh and given a date of ca. A.D. 1660–1790 (225 +/-65 years before 1950).
2. Hélène Copin first traveled to Africa in 1952. Shortly after her marriage to Henri Kamer, they opened a gallery devoted to non-Western art at 90, boulevard Raspail in Paris and later one on Madison Avenue in New York. In 1966 she started a gallery on the quai Malaquais. Following her divorce from Kamer, she married the architect Philippe Leloup, and the name of the gallery was changed to Galerie Leloup in 1979.
3. The exhibition was on view from May 28 to June 22, 1974. See Kamer 1974.
4. "Depuis vingt ans que je me consacre à l'art nègre j'ai vu évoluer le goût et l'intérêt des collectionneurs. Dans cet art que l'on appelait 'sauvage' ils s'attachaient avec prédilection à des formes déjà parvenues à une perfection classique: statues Fang, masques Baoulé, bronzes royaux du Bénin. Les critères de qualité étaient finesse de la sculpture, harmonie des volumes, brillance des patines, en somme, les mêmes que ceux utilisés dès la Renaissance pour juger des oeuvres d'art." Kamer 1974, p. 1.
5. "L'étude radiographique de l'ensemble de la statue souligne encore la beauté de l'objet." See the "Rapport sommaire pour une sculpture en bois (extremité de tambour?) provenant du Nigeria proposée à l'achat par le Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens," illegible signature, Laboratoire, Palais du Louvre, December 3, 1973.
6. Hélène Kamer, in conversation with the author, August 12, 2012.
7. The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War (July 1967–January 15, 1970), was a conflict over the attempted secession of Nigeria's southeastern provinces, which aspired to become the Republic of Biafra.
8. Hélène Leloup shared with me the gallery's log books from this period. The entries for these works include Traoré's passport number and address as well as the price of each transaction, as required by French law.
9. Cole and Aniakor 1984, p. 87.
10. Kamer 1974, p. 2, and in conversation with the author.
11. In Kamer's catalogue (1974) the town is spelled Obubra or Abubra (see note 42 below).
12. See Nicolas and Sourrieu 1996, p. 138, fig. 111. Additional works that may be related include a crested kneeling male figure published by Ezio Bassani (2005, p. 215, fig. 88a) and a standing male figure published by Marie-Louise Bastin (1984, no. 223). Several other highly eroded works in French and German private collections have been labeled as Mbembe, most notably a seated male figure once owned by Jacques Kerchache and two in the

collection of the artist Georg Baselitz. The ex-Kerchache work retains signs indicating that the figure was once part of a ceremonial drum. Stylistically, the works appear to relate to a distinct regional center, rather than to this corpus.

13. Hackett 1988, pp. 59, 69.
14. Afigbo 2005, pp. 172, 175.
15. Harris 1965, p. 3.
16. Ibid., p. 8.
17. Ibid., p. 25.
18. Harris 1984, p. 61.
19. Partridge 1905, p. 202.
20. Harris 1984, p. 61.
21. Ibid., pp. 61–62.
22. Ibid., p. 62.
23. Harris 1965, p. 12.
24. Harris 1984, p. 62.
25. Ibid.
26. Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985, p. 43.
27. Ibid., p. 38.
28. Ibid., p. 37.
29. Ibid., p. 40.
30. Cole and Aniakor 1984, p. 87.
31. Kamer 1974, p. 1.
32. Harris 1984, p. 61.
33. Herbert Cole explains that these rites doubtless involved multiple offerings of animal sacrifices. In conversations and email exchanges with author, May 25, 2013.
34. Cole and Aniakor 1984, p. 87.
35. Talbot 1912, pp. 217–18.
36. Cole and Aniakor 1984, p. 88.
37. Ibid., p. 87.
38. Harris 1984, p. 63.
39. Eyo 1977, p. 204.
40. Krieger 1969, pp. 235–36, 237; Koloss 2002, pp. 90, 208, no. 63.
41. Partridge 1905, p. 77.
42. The town's name is spelled Abubra in Kamer's transcription of this account in her 1974 catalogue (p. 2).
43. "Je sais qu'après notre mort nos arrières petit-fils connaîtont des siècles plus aisés que le nôtre; mais pour leur rappeler que cette aisance vient de nous, qui avons combattu pour leur liberté, je vous demande que la tête de ma statue soit coupée et enterrée avec les restes de mon corps; cela leur rappelera que de nombreuses têtes furent coupées pour leur liberté mais que si nos faces ont disparus, nos forces, elles, les guideront désormais." Kamer 1974, p. 2. Radiocarbon testing of one of these torsos in the Menil Collection, Houston, provided a date of A.D. 1470 +/- 90, and another formerly in the collection of Bernard de Grunne, Brussels, has been dated A.D. 1440 +/- 55.
44. Bastin 1984, no. 223.
45. Berns in Berns, Fardon, and Kasfir 2011, pp. 550–55.
46. Heinrich Schweitzer brought this work in a private collection to my attention in June 2013 and made the work accessible for viewing.
47. Partridge 1905, pp. 223–24.

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